

Country Updates on Human Rights and Democracy 2019

Lao People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR)

1. Overview of the human rights and democracy situation: The Lao PDR did not make significant progress in 2019 towards the national objective to establish a genuine rule of law State.

Laos is still lagging behind in terms of effective implementation of its international human rights obligations in several areas.

The Lao PDR has a weak regulatory environment, law enforcement and accountability. Corruption remains a main challenge for the government which has adopted (but enforced with uneven results) several reform policies regarding fiscal transparency, forestry and wildlife trafficking.

The rights to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly remained restricted, and the state continue to exercise a close control over media and civil society. There was no progress on investigations into a number of enforced disappearances.

2. EU action - key focus areas: The EU continued to pursue its efforts in promoting an independent Lao civil society and in advocating for Human Rights Defenders, in light of a worrying trend of disappearances and imprisonments.

3. EU bilateral political engagement: The EU continued to engage with the government authorities notably through the human rights and governance dialogue held in March 2019 in Vientiane. Topics ranged from civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights to fundamental freedoms and the rights of women, children, ethnic and vulnerable groups. The dialogue also touched upon the three UN Treaty-Bodies' reviews undertaken by Laos in 2018 and the next UPR cycle.

The round table meeting held in November 2019 brought together government agencies and development partners, including representatives from the civil society and the private sector. It highlighted the nexus between human Rights and sustainable development. This was also an opportunity to raise the EU's concerns about the slow pace of implementation and the recent trend of worrying cross-border disappearances.

The EU, a member of the governance sector working group, co-chaired in 2019 the sub-working group on legal and institutional oversight that allows for policy dialogue between the government and international donors.

In 2019, the EU participated in the quarterly civil society working groups meetings between CSOs, the government and donors, and broadening its engagement and dialogue with CSOs partners.

4. EU financial engagement: Both the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Civil Society organisations-Local Authorities (CSO-LA) remain two significant tools to support civil society's activities and CSOs capacity-building initiatives.

On-going projects address, inter alia, the promotion and protection of the rights of women and children, people with disabilities, labour rights, victims of trafficking and ethnic groups

as well as their participation in policy shaping and access to public services. Two calls for Proposals were launched in 2019 under the CSO (EUR 3 million) and EIDHR (EUR 2 million) thematic funds, opening up to Lao CSOs with a special, dedicated lot under the EIDHR Call.

In 2019, the EU financial and operational support to the governance sector continued to be shaped in the framework of the 'Citizen Engagement for Good Governance, Accountability and the Rule of Law (CEGGA)', co-funded by the EU together with Switzerland and Germany. This programme promoted civil society engagement, contributed to strengthen core parliamentary functions, and the implementation of the rule of law and human rights.

5. Multilateral context: Upon invitation of the Lao government, the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty visited the country in March 2019. While acknowledging major progress in the field of poverty alleviation over the last decades, his report highlighted the uneven prioritisation of the economic and infrastructure projects that did not lead to a 'commensurate reduction in poverty'.

The third Universal Periodic Review (UPR) for the Lao PDR set for January 2020 allows to assess the 2030 Agenda achievements, and to share best practices in tracking the country's human rights obligations.